

# Corporate Schooling and Decorative Metrics: The Iconography of Academy School Chains in England

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## **Abstract**

*The continuation of neo-liberalism requires concerted effort. Political consent is constructed through practices of enforced cultural socialisation, the mobilisations of which obfuscate other realities. David Harvey describes this process as the construction of consent.<sup>i</sup> The common sense encouraged by English academy schools is the result of the mobilisation legitimated by teaching and learning practices through a hegemony of attainment metrics. These metrics construct a neo-liberal pupil habitus and contextualise schooling within technological rationalism. The capture of state schooling and its disaggregation by economic elites, it is argued, reflects a continuing project to maintain lifestyles and privilege within a political order that has served it, and the government involved, handsomely. As neo-liberal institutions, academy schools, it is argued, inculcate dispositions favouring corporate and bio-political economic productivity. Academy schools' web sites and Freedom of Information request data about academy school meetings are utilised to support the argument of the paper.*

**Keywords:** academy, metrics, neo-liberalism, representations

## **The Rise of the Academy**

The immediate empirical and intellectual focus of the paper is academy school chains in England, together with the incorporation, by the British Government's

Department of Education, of metrics into the presentation of educational attainment. Given the role of education in reproducing social and economic orders, recognition of wider ideologies within which education is nested is important for an appreciation of current and future forms of reproduction of a status quo. Briefly, a dominant theme over recent decades is the idea that everyone in a society benefits through laissez-faire capitalism where, by limiting market regulation, the wealth earned by the few benefits the many through ‘trickle-down’. In fact, under a free market economic political system, trickle-up is the true state of affairs -money is being sucked upwards to the already privileged as industrial policy disproportionately benefits elites (Chang, 2011, 2014). It is against this broader industrial and moral background that the politically distinctive purpose of the academization of English schooling should be understood.

A frequently cited theme from all academies is that of branding and re-branding which are judged to be important in setting a new ethos, establishing the esteem of the academy in the local area, and for enhancing student recruitment (Gibson, 2015). However, there is more to re-branding: this paper argues re-branding is symbolic of school shift towards ontologies of neo-liberalism. Statistical representation of school progress does not invite debate or contestation. Its apparent objectivity is undeniably functional to its power to exclude different models of human flourishing. Numerical data packaging in digestible bites symbolically signifies numbers as impartial and beyond discursive reproach. The contribution offered by this paper is designed to challenge the adoption of mathematical terms to subvert other models for judging progression in education. The research question with which this paper grapples is: how does the academy school system model its educational identity and associated accounts of attainment?

The historic reference of the paper is Margaret Thatcher's adoption of economic policy to justify privatisation, tax cuts for the affluent and laws hostile to trade unions. The solidarity garnered by unions threatened the individualist society the New Right sought to entrench; domination could not be taken for granted, and is still an ongoing process moving into various realms. Metrical systems of audit and reporting accountability also pervade higher education in the form of the Research Excellence Framework<sup>ii</sup> and the Teaching Excellence Framework<sup>iii</sup>, but the realm of this paper is the period of compulsory schooling. The ascendancy of the econocracy, where educational and other objectives are subservient to their effects on the national economy, is a narrative subsequently reinforced by David Cameron's government which encouraged the public to see a simple analogy between national government and household management.

In 1997 New Labour reinforced the role of commercial actors in state schooling, and since then education policy has been designed to entrench the participation of private actors in education governance (Newman, 2001). The City Academies Programme was launched in 2000: failing inner-city schools were to be closed then reopened as City Academies run by external sponsors who were required to give an initial £2M investment (Gunter, 2011). This neo-liberal policy framed commercial actors as making schools more efficient, part of which meant forging a curriculum and assessment system capable of ensuring students benefit from "useful knowledge" (Department for Education and Skills, 2007). So, efficiency, commerce and constructs of evidence are associated with the foregrounding of metrics by academy schools in England whose educational dynamic is constituted by a business-like process modelling. Through analysis of corporate language and data sets and academy School Leadership Team meeting minutes, this paper contributes to the thesis that education has become an industry from which neo-liberal capitalists mine community resources for the speedy reproduction of a benchmarked bio-political productivity (Pierce, 2013).

Neo-liberal schooling is required for the effective reproduction of the British neo-liberal capitalist order. Alternative ways of living and valuing, and different political practices, are suppressed (Giroux, 2009). By opening the governance of significant swaths of the education system to business entrepreneurs the econocratic state can reproduce itself through shaping new labour forces. This perspective underpins the interpretation of the empirical data throughout this paper: firstly, the policy context of the academy school enterprise is examined; secondly, the theoretical basis of this metrification of schooling is addressed; thirdly, presentation of empirical data illustrates ways in which a neo-liberal mentality is imbricated in corporate language and its fondness for discourses of measurement, exposing the metrical discourse selected by commercial actors in the education sector to project neo-liberal friendly reputation and construct a model of performativity based upon a mathematically defined reality.

The British government has othered traditional modes of school education by its introduction of an education market-place populated by business entrepreneurs. This paper aims to expose the metrical discourse selected by quasi-educational commercial actors to project reputation, construct a mathematical performativity and deliver a workforce suited to the conditions of liquid modernity. Bauman's (2001, 2008) theorisation of modernity as a process of increasing individuality provides a deep purchase on understanding the emphasis of academy schools. Pierce's (2007) likening of capitalist logic to an extractive project mining the human resources of students connects the schooling practices of the academy school sector in England to the reproduction of market mentality, where responsibility and competitive worth is cultivated in such a way that individual students conceptualise their thriving or exclusion by self-reference.

Policies on academies originate in reforms of schooling in England during the late 1980s, a time when the Conservative government promoted market forces and sought to marginalise local authorities (Jones, 2003). The 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) and the 1992 White Paper on ‘choice’ and ‘diversity’ in schooling (Tomlinson, 2005) are examples of this development. The ERA meant devolved management structures for schools, more choice for parents and the consequential development of a quasi-market (Walford, 2000; Le Grand and Bartlett, 1993). The English City Technology Colleges were involved with commercial actors shaping governance, forging links with the world of work, developing a curriculum with a business orientation (Walford, 1991; DfE, 1992), and thereby modelling how autonomous schools might be encouraged to develop. The performance of these schools is monitored and annually assessed, by methods that include comparative assessment and value-added metrics, by an inspectorate deployed by the Department for Education. <sup>iv</sup>

The British Conservative government is keen to compel all maintained schools to convert to academy status by 2022 (House of Commons, 2017: 3). Despite mixed results in the higher national examination performance of academy schools compared with other forms of state provision, this hybrid commercialized sector continues to proliferate across England and may soon dominate provision (Ball, 2007, 2012; Behattacharya, 2013; Papanastasiou, 2013; Woods *et al.*, 2007). Academies are state-funded non-fee-paying schools in England, independent of local authorities, and they have funding agreements directly with the Secretary of State (House of Commons, 2017). Many academy schools are converter schools that were previously maintained by local authorities, others are sponsor schools. As at January 2016, 65.5% of secondary pupils, and 19.5% of primary pupils attended academy schools in England (House of Commons, 2017: 6). Each ‘low performing’ or ‘special measures’ school becoming an academy is expected to have a sponsor “to bring added

drive, expertise and capacity to the school” (House of Commons, 2017: 8); the corporate sponsors, besides their own external business interests, are responsible for appointing the school leadership and teaching staff.

Oversight of academies is undertaken by three bodies: the Education and Skills Funding Agency, school’s inspectorate (Ofsted) and regional schools commissioners. Academy sponsors and companies and individuals related to academy sponsors may provide contracted services to their sponsored schools so long as it is provided ‘at cost’ if over certain financial limits. There is no mechanism for an academy to return to local authority control (House of Commons, 2017).

Many academies are part of multi-academy trusts (MATs), a network or ‘chain’ of schools across different geographic locations but under one legal body. ARK and the Harris Federation are reputed to be amongst the most successful of the English academy chains. ARK (which stands for ‘absolute returns for kids’) runs a network of 35 schools in the UK. The Harris Federation chain of academy schools, besides an extensive school network, has three subsidiary commercial companies: 1. Harris Academies Project Management Limited, 2. HCTC Enterprises Limited, 3. Harris Professional Services Limited. <sup>v</sup> The Anti-Academies Alliance has argued such chains are “edu-businesses” paying enormous salaries to their chief executives, with corporate branding part of the pursuit of an aggressive expansion in an education market-place.<sup>vi</sup>

## **Theoretical Background**

The conceit ‘decorative metrics’ captures the manipulation of educational reality by those who sponsor and govern the academy school system in England. The privileging of numbers is decorative by way of its concealment of contestation about values, and decoration through metrics characterises the

choice of commercial branding suited to the ideological linkage of these types of schools with the financial statistics underpinning achievement discourses of capitalism. Burke (2011) argues visual images, like faces, always hold something to be read if we know how to read them. Images are evidence of something and hold meaning. The interpretation of images is iconography. Web site sources of statistical performativity are the visual images explored in this paper. As documents, their context elicits from the interested viewer a ‘gaze’ which may not be conscious, but contains discourses and values.

Bauman (2001, 2008) helps us to explain the ideology of measurement that this system relies upon. In modernity, society has become ‘liquid’, open, flexible and challenging to control. Neo-liberalism thrives in this environment of individuality and the market. To help the individual know who they are and whether they have done enough to prove themselves, a global reference system has entered the world, replacing pre-allocated reference groups. Metrics performs this role, being borderless, globally transparent and suited to creating the spaces for individual thriving to be recognised, both individually and in the wider constituencies of the market. The academy system imposes a structure with benchmarking of merit that supersedes the contentious nature of more qualitative systems. Bauman proposes that as government has retreated, the task of constructing and maintaining an identity, a place in the social order, has been devolved to the entrepreneur. The radical unlocking of individual choices from collective projects or a social solidarity leads to a privatized modernity.

Neo-liberalism, scholars argue, “is often perceived as an economic policy in which government spending is reduced, in reality it is the extension of the colonisation of land, wealth, culture and power. Policies related to neo-liberalism privilege profit over people and corporate enterprise over the common good” (Sonu *et al.*, 2016: 4). Sonu *et al.* (2016: 5) maintain that “the

employment of positivist, empirical science in the production of the stable image is part of the postmodern condition”. In a similar vein Harvey (2004) argues that government policies tied up with documenting improvement, especially using test scores, create an illusion of progress, whose benefits accrue to elites. The supporters of this neo-liberal society benefit from the crisis-culture they wish to convey as natural rather than constructed. Academy school ideology fosters dispositions of flexibility and entrepreneurialism as individual capacities whose tenacity can be tested, and quality assured, through “metrics” and “benchmarks”. This ontology is a performative type of truth.

Notable public intellectuals have struggled with these issues in recent years. A body of critical thought has engaged with identifying the type of life and identity being either created or excluded by schooling (Giroux, 2009). Bio-political theory examines the ways in which student subjectivities are moulded (Foucault, 2003). Another strand of enquiry examines how the interconnection of education with neo-liberalism privileges and excludes certain outcomes: STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) disciplines are privileged as they are associated with the reproduction of techno-science and/or underpin economic growth in the capitalist model (Peters *et al.* (2010). Pierce (2013) argues policies and rationalities for education are increasingly driven by the needs of bio-capitalism, which is why the STEM areas are celebrated. The role of metrics is a lynchpin in this context: it can effectively neutralise other expressions of being and worth which are anathema to the extractive needs of capitalism. Pierce (2013) argues metrics make life calculable and amenable to an econometric type grid of value assessment. The deployment of corporate data by academy trusts and their schools represents truth management designed to “prove” measurable increases in learning and are deployed to justify a metrical model of educational progression.



Whilst Grek and Ozga (2008) recognised a European-wide trend to shape education through numbers, and its implications for “narrowing” education, they did not apply their discoveries to a contested form of quasi-privatised provision and its representation of schooling in England; for this reason, they overlook the political cloak served by metrical decorative cladding. Stephen Ball (2007) identified commercial actors’ infiltration into state education - the private consultants, public-private partnerships, policy community profiles, personal relationships where members of the ‘power elite’ are introduced to shape education policy; now the state itself is merely one of several actors in policy implementation and organisation (Ball, 2009; Newman, 2001; Coleman and Skogstad, 1990). Ball’s analysis is suggestive of a financial metrification of educational provision, but we need to place more emphasis on the incorporation of discourses of benchmarks and metrics as stabilising points of ‘truth’.

Entrepreneurial new public management of the public-sector leads to a privileging of private-sector governance styles, with a focus on measurement, performance, and audit (Clarke and Newman, 1993; Willcocks and Harrow, 1992; Osborne *et al.*, 1995). Business elites are increasing their grip as intermediaries connecting cultural, political and economic life in processes of government outsourcing that the academy system manifests; these elites perform accountabilities without necessarily being themselves accountable (Caletrio, 2012). Higham (2014: 404) concludes his analysis of the governance of free schools in England by claiming their quasi-privatised ownership means their owners can “mould state education in their own interests”. In this neo-liberal landscape of privatisation, Ranson (2012) argues, corporate executive governing bodies replace stakeholders from local communities, and it has been found that self-interest is an “important motivation among proposers” of these types of school (Higham, 2014: 420).

Geographical scholarship on the politics of calculation highlights the role of statistics in geospatial technology, and its use in the production of a geocoded territorial world of inscriptions (Rose-Redwood, 2011). The rise of culture in economic studies draws our attention to how shared meanings shape markets through which, using interpretative analysis, the meanings of social life can be illuminated (Wherry, 2014, 2016). The economic dimension of the current study relates to the fact of economic actors' involvement in academy schools, their business logics, and how the meanings they introduce impact upon the cultural construction of pupil performance, which is also subject to a generic neo-liberal rendering. Metrics refers to a type of measurement that quantifies an entity in the real world (Mendling, 2008: 105). The strategic business ethos that academy schools bring to the delivery of education utilises metrics for a variety of purposes, explored below. Metrics are traditionally associated with audit processes of safety management, key performance indicators and behaviour change in business, healthcare environments and environmental monitoring (Centre for Chemical Process Safety, 2010; McLean, 2013; Mitnick, 2000; Paul *et al.*, 2011). It is argued that the dominance of a metrics of performance reflects not only the affiliations of these schools with the world of business but also a desire to project an accountability that privileges a replication of objectivity, whilst denying more nuanced education narratives. The adoption of statistical measures of outcomes is therefore not neutral, but the hegemony of numbers, so common in the business world, annexes to these academies an unquestioned authority and a type of competitive edge suiting their ideological origin.

Business process modelling is a key element in the management of business processes that are subject to quantitative consideration (Mendling, 2008). Adam Smith (1776) represents early business process management thinking, illustrated by the benefits gained by analysing pin production. Frederick Taylor (1911)

developed an optimal work environment based on scientific methods that he claimed leveraged the most efficient deployment of labour. Henry Ford (1926) invented the assembly line to reduce the production cycle in his factories and thereby increase productivity and profit. Academy sponsors are likely to be familiar, if not with these foundational texts in economics, then with the thinking they project about profit maximization and output measurement. Metrics in the business process model assigns numbers to attributes of entities in the real world to represent the amount of those attributes possessed by the entities (Mendling, 2008). Measurement serves the purposes of control and improvement. It endeavours to make concepts, their tracking and their control, visible in order to meet predetermined goals.

During the formation of an academy, school local authority governance is forfeited and replaced by a direct relation of the sponsor with the neo-liberal state; this augments the leverage towards social dislocation and the weakening of social cohesion oriented to local cultures of history and traditions of neighbourhood. Nguyen (2017) explains how factors associated with neo-liberalism contribute to an abstraction from tradition and the local. Decline in traditional forms of deliberation have impacted upon the credibility and public relevance of speech and extended text containing nuance. Instead public discourse is more conversational, and modern rhetoric is designed to manipulate. The latter is functional and efficient, aiming to convey messages using the minimum number of words, a phenomenon that we see replicated on the public websites of the academies we discuss below. The sparseness of this communicative practice reflects how it avoids contextual complexity whilst favouring a putative simplicity. Nguyen (2017: 1) argues:

“...literate culture abstracts knowledge from the context in which and by whom it is produced, leading to neutral and abridged discursive formats like lists, statistics, facts, and how-to manuals”.

Citing the work of Vivian (2004) Nguyen (2017: 2) argues a privileging of quotable sound bites and cognate communicative practices is inherent in neo-liberalism “as an ideology that promotes efficiency”; this represents a “communicative capitalism” where individual over communal interests are paramount to this neo-liberal adult-subject, whose choice of discourse arguably obviates alternative perspectives, while seeming to favour ‘simplicity’.

### **Researching Academy Schools**

Neo-liberalism emphasizes that it is more efficient than the public sector, which in the UK continues to be subject to severe cuts, and, at the same time, privatisation of the provision of public goods and services has intensified. Neo-liberalism privileges deregulation, market competition and sub-contracting (Nguyen, 2017: 4). Michel Foucault regards the neo-liberal subject as an entrepreneur who calculates on monetary grounds their self-interests and mode of reputational projection (Foucault, 2008). Ark Academy’s principal, in her appraisal of their first year as an ARK academy chain school, judges through the language of business, stating:

“Packard’s Law of Business: Those who build great companies understand that the ultimate throttle on growth for any great company is not the markets, or technologies, or competition, or products. It is one thing about above all others: the ability to keep enough of the right people.”<sup>vii</sup>

As forms of communicative cultural practices, it is argued that these neo-liberal regimes embodied in academy school organisational settings fight to legitimate their achievements through an ontology of metrics which reflects wider changes

in communication that are bound up with neo-liberalism, and examined below (Nguyen, 2017: 2). Gramsci's concept of "hegemony" refers to how elites could maintain their control ideologically by declaring cultural values as hegemonic to portray them as common sense (Abbink and Salverda, 2013: 9). Elites utilise networks whose incumbents may help illuminate the emphasis of a hegemony. In this sense sponsors are a 'political class' with the capacity to exercise power in society, in this case through a type of cultural reproduction afforded by schooling (Bottomore, 1973: 14).

Metrics are a politics of representation used by the corporate school to inform its organisation's public identity and foreground a hegemonic definition of professional effectiveness, a neo-liberal trend that was imported from the US (Goodwin *et al.*, 2017). We know that inspections and examinations, each producing metrical outcomes, are utilised to steer and evaluate academy schools (Kauko *et al.*, 2015). Hatcher (2006) argues sponsored academies replace older forces by new agents that drive the Government's agenda. The functions encouraged by these actors are:

1. School management to be innovative
2. Altered education practices
3. Foster pro-business school ethos.

Gunter & McGinity (2014) argue sponsors have become a form of 'oligarchy' that suppresses the voices of the other actors (Simkins *et al.*, 2015), while according to Wilkins (2015) school governors are being controlled by the market principles of academy sponsors, where the chain sponsor restricts and imposes managerial practices (Kauko *et al.*, 2015; Chapman, 2013). The market logic and business principles of some Academy chains align with government audit culture and they have attracted charges of empire building, democratic

deficiency and undermining public schooling (Keddie, 2014; Hill, 2010; Ball, 2009). Contentious players are philanthropic providers who are outside the caring domain of the welfare state (Lipman, 2011). They value enterprise and meritocracy, they are a new governmentality (Olmedo, 2014).

Papanastasiou (2013, 2017) suggests that chain sponsorship will mean policy becomes dominated by sponsors, rather than educationists. There has been a general increase in private actors in education since the 2008 financial crisis (Ball *et al.*, 2012). This involvement takes several forms: the use of private consultants (Ball, 2007); the introduction of long contracts in return for injection of capital into education services (Chitty, 2009); the presence of commercial actors in the policy communities (Ball and Junemann, 2012). The power of staff appointment given to sponsors of academy schools is critically important to neo-liberal outcomes and is likely to re-orientate them away from a welfarist to a managerial policy framework (Gewirtz, 2002; Courtney, 2015). According to Goodwin *et al.* (2017: 32) “The ambient environment of neo-liberalism has replaced the collective professional expertise with the authority of market statistics”. Woods *et al.* (2007: 240) argue this territorial take-over of education by agents in the stronger fields of politics and economy dismantles public sector workforce legislation and establishes a more conditional world of statistically led performativity. Goodwin *et al.* (2017: 24) commenting on the US, argue that:

“In this market environment, standardized test scores increasingly become the surrogate for professional expertise...Scores on these tests became the vehicle for policy-makers to enforce their new workforce curricula at the same time that they allowed a consumerist public to measure the purported quality of their educational product”.

The deregulation this represents was a prominent feature of the period of office held by Prime Minister Tony Blair, when even school playground space and class sizes were deregulated, according to the Anti-Academies Alliance; shrinking the space required for playgrounds freed up land that could then be built upon.<sup>viii</sup> Deregulation, however, did not begin with Blair: American economist Milton Friedman (1912-2006), who advocated dismantling welfare programmes and injecting market structures across public life, had been an advisor to Margaret Thatcher. For Friedman education was no different from industry: schools, he argued, must become responsive to market-forces in a form of post-welfare state (Tomlinson, 2005). Frederik von Hayek (1899-1992) the philosopher-economist also influenced Margaret Thatcher's economic policy through his emphasis upon a limited democracy of governance, where the state focussed only upon the rule of law, and society was based around a market order with private investment in public markets, seeing this as a better path to wealth creation than government spending programmes. The recommendations of these thinkers are foundational to the development of the academy programme.

Research has examined how private actors operate in education through social network analysis (Ball and Junemann, 2012), through the concept of new public management (Ferguson 2000), and through public-private partnership (Robertson *et al.*, 2012). The lines are blurred between 'private' and 'public' spheres. Papanastasiou (2013), in her case study of a Local Education Authority in NW England, used a methodology of interviewing academy sponsors, and concluded England's academy policy gives commercial actors the opportunity to expand into new markets. She argues commercial sponsors illustrate boundary blurring between the 'private' and 'public' spheres, and this reconstructs public-private categories. She asked: How have corporate sponsors come to be involved in academies policy? and What is the role of commercial

actors in the governance of education? It is important to note that she did not interview the sponsors themselves, and she makes the questionable assumption that the interview material provides a complete and accurate picture of the sponsor's motives. She found that the sponsors got involved to build community ties, connect young people to the world of work and show corporate care and responsibility. Papanastasiou (2017) examined how principals and sponsors understand their collaboration in five academy schools. The sponsor organisations were private businesses and major local employers. She found that sponsors argue they offer 'good governance', targets, measurement, and knowledge of the 'world of work', that the Principals received training in business in order to focus on competitiveness in new public management, and that sponsors were empowered more than principals to shape academy work. She argues "Academies are restructuring the traditional relationships of accountability in the state education system by the way they remove the accountability of the link between schools and their local authorities..." (2017: 83).

Commercial sponsors relate to locality and this link affects the assemblage of policies. Private sector principles are being made legitimate across European education spaces, and govern the meaning of education. We are still learning about the role of these commercial actors within education governance. The European Union's Open Method of Coordination privileges 'competitiveness' and legitimates private sector ideology (Dale, 2004; Jones *et al.*, 2008). The 'governance turn' in education reflected the closely developing networks of interdependence between the public and private sectors (Kooiman, 1993). Commercial and private actors are now integral to how state governance operates and has altered (Ball, 2008; Novoa and Lawn, 2002).



The legal and financial contractual arrangements with the Secretary of State that academy schools establish are business arrangements where company formation is sealed. The neo-liberal privileging of the market described earlier is reflected not only through the invitation to business to participate in the leadership and management of schooling, but also by introducing greater choice for consumers in this market-place. Through their extensive usage of metrics, the representations of performance offered for public consumption span the domains of schools, business and government including its quality assurance agencies with whom a performative audit culture is now historical. Accepting that the government is neo-liberal, and that to advance this societal vision it utilises specific types of governance over the school system, compels attention to the nature of this “steering” by which academies are legally and morally required to abide.

Wherry (2016) describes this general orientation towards measuring output as a cultural approach to the economics of relational accounting where shared meanings shape markets. Keddie (2015) undertook interviews with the Executive Director of CONNECT and four of its chain’s eleven primary school head teachers (HTs).<sup>ix</sup> CONNECT is a top performing academy chain run by a large and successful philanthropic organisation – the focus of this chain is literacy and numeracy. She found the language of business animated the Head Teacher’s orientation to ‘value adding’, and ‘results’. The perspective is everyone can do well if they ‘decide’ to take opportunities and adopt an entrepreneurial disposition. The tax payer is seen as a shareholder in the business of schools and should reap ‘results’, a return on their financial investment. She argues CONNECT prioritizes their own business interests – their influence on education nevertheless “tends to be opaque and not open to public scrutiny” (Wilkins, 2012; Gunter, 2012b).

Keddie (2015) argues academy chains are a modality of state power. For Ball (2009) this system represents a shift from hierarchy to ‘heterarchy’ – these are complex administrative structures that blur the divide between public and private sectors. The argument pursued in this paper is that this blurring is accomplished through the adoption and celebration of statistical indices and ways of reporting attainment. The blurring of boundaries between the public and private sectors of education occurs because, by using statistics, academy schools situate themselves more than is typically the case with the for-profit commercial sector. Academies are rendered into the business ontology through their deployment of the corporate sector’s quantitative lexicon for measuring the effective use of resources. Ball (2009) argues academization is “regulated self-regulation” where the state is dependent upon an array of state and non-state policy actors.

### **Methodology & Sources**

The academies’ website data are quantitative, but they include qualitative text to tell a story about the meaning of the numbers and graphs. This story line is designed to manage the ‘gaze’ of the viewer and impress them with the legitimacy of a quantitative definition of progress and to celebrate it persuasively by recourse to the hegemony of mathematics. The figures in these official data sources refer to the curriculum and the success of the teaching and learning approach within an ethos of capitalist stretching that gave rise to the metrical outcomes. Burke (2011:125) refers to the term ‘gaze’ being borrowed from the psychoanalyst Jacques Lucan (1901-1981). As expressive of point of view we can think of gaze as an interpretive scheme; the scientific gaze, the consumer gaze or the neo-liberal gaze are possible frames through which the ‘gaze’ operates. The viewer’s gaze imposes desires, expectations, biases onto the already highly prepared visual text. It is argued the website material and the

gaze of the likely viewer conspire to construct images of unquestioned success and linear progression.

A cultural approach argues structured meaning systems underpin performance data which shape the choice of accounting priorities by education providers. Apart from visual representations as a data source, Freedom of Information (FOI) requests were made to several academy chains in England for the minutes of meetings of the school staff. This triangulated approach was designed to pursue the question of whether the meanings of the websites were also a part of the internal culture of the school. The minutes of meetings offer the opportunity to explore this question and examine of whether a decorative metrics marks an academy's interior through which a desired gaze is nurtured and maintained. The FOI requests were designed to elicit qualitative data, it being expected that the minutes of formal staff meetings over the academic year 2016-17 would, *ex hypothesis*, yield data congruent with what is reported through website visual text.

A pervasive feature of the formal meetings whose data we accessed through FOI requests for the period September 2016-March 2017 is a discourse of targets, data, results, performance measures, CATS scores, grades, attainment, raising aspirations and monitoring. <sup>x</sup>Table 1 illustrates the semiotics of this performative culture and its data-driven ontology portrayed as a “metrics cloud” of terms that proliferate across the FOI data set. Some academy chains declined to supply data in response to our FOI request explaining either they do not hold staff meetings, or they do not make records of them. Academy schools in the north and south of England are represented.

**Table 1**  
**Academy Senior Leadership Team Staff Meetings-2016-2017**  
**“Metrics Cloud”**


evidence	tests	Assessment week	Data analysis
Assessment profiles	Low level children	Google Doc monitoring sheet	Look at marking
Fine grading	Conversion data	Data sheets	Improvement plan
Predicted grade	Improvement plan	Pupils accrue points	targets
graphs	Baseline observations	Mark schemes	Typicality checks
Learning matrix	logistic of pastoral detention	Using live data	Accelerant progress
Student underperforming	Google form for pastoral detainees	Lesson observation data	Quality assurance
Performance management	Attendance data	Standardized score	Progression training
Tracking sheet	External validation	Risk assessment	Visible learning matrix
Behaviour data	Algorithm for target setting	Not enough teachers using data	Reporting system

The discourses illustrated through the “metrics cloud” lead to the observation that academy school culture parallels a business enterprise. Student learning is “created” by a foregrounding of measurement and the measurable. Pierce’s (2007) trope of schooling as an extractive process resonates with obsessive emphasis upon recording the human resources being extracted and designing a statistical framework of cumulative endeavour that maps outcomes through monitoring. Finding a common thread across school minutes over time and academy chain schools demonstrates the existence of a homogenizing “educational vision”. The ontology behind the “metrics cloud” reveals that “achievement” is defined numerically. The metrical emphasis arises from the need to audit investment and monitor its effective use. Figures I, II and III below illustrate a continuation of this narrative of extractive precision.

The representation in Figure I illustrates the deployment of statistical science as the hegemonic cultural frame used by the academy school system. These visual data conjure the image of hard science and present objectivity. The bar graphs and reference to “experimental statistics” in the headline of Figure I is congruent with neo-liberal culture in the sense of the latter’s formulation of progress as measurable.

# Figure I

## Experimental Statistics: Multi-academy trust performance measures, England 2015-16<sup>xi</sup>



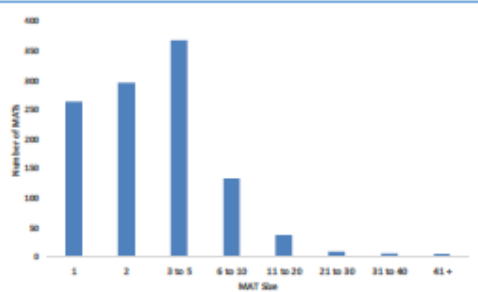
**Department for Education**

**Experimental Statistics: Multi-academy trust performance measures: England, 2015 to 2016**

SFR 02/2017, 19 January 2017

This release presents performance measures for multi-academy trusts (MATs) with at least three schools with results in 2016 that had been with the MAT for at least three years. Figures are based on the new school accountability progress measures introduced this year. These are relative measures based around a national pupil-level average of zero. Explanations for MAT performance can be complex, including their mix of sponsored academies and converters. More details can be found in our methodology document.

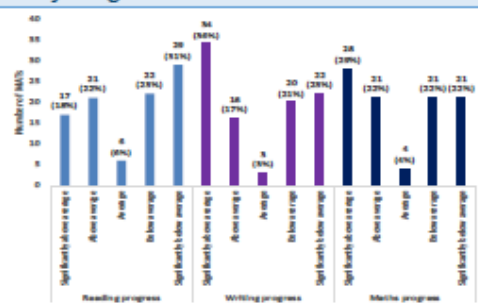
### What are academies and multi-academy trusts?



Academies are state schools directly funded by the government. Each one is part of an academy trust. Trusts can be standalone or multi-academy trusts (MATs) - trusts that are responsible for a group of academies.

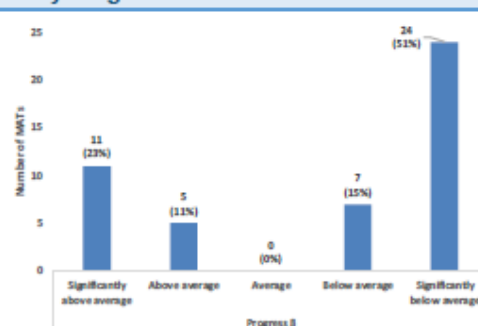
There were over 21,525 state-funded schools in England on 01 November 2016. Of these 5,758 were academies, of which 1,618 were stand-alone academies and 4,140 schools were in MATs.

### At key stage 2 more than half the MATs had above average progress in writing and maths



However, on the measure of reading progress over half of the MATs have scores that are below average<sup>1</sup>. These are relative measures calculated using data for individual pupils. The average for pupils (in mainstream schools) is zero so around half of pupils are above average and half below. MAT scores depend on the performance of their pupils, a statistically significant result does not mean the score is very far from the average.

### At key stage 4 two thirds of the MATs had progress 8 scores that were below average

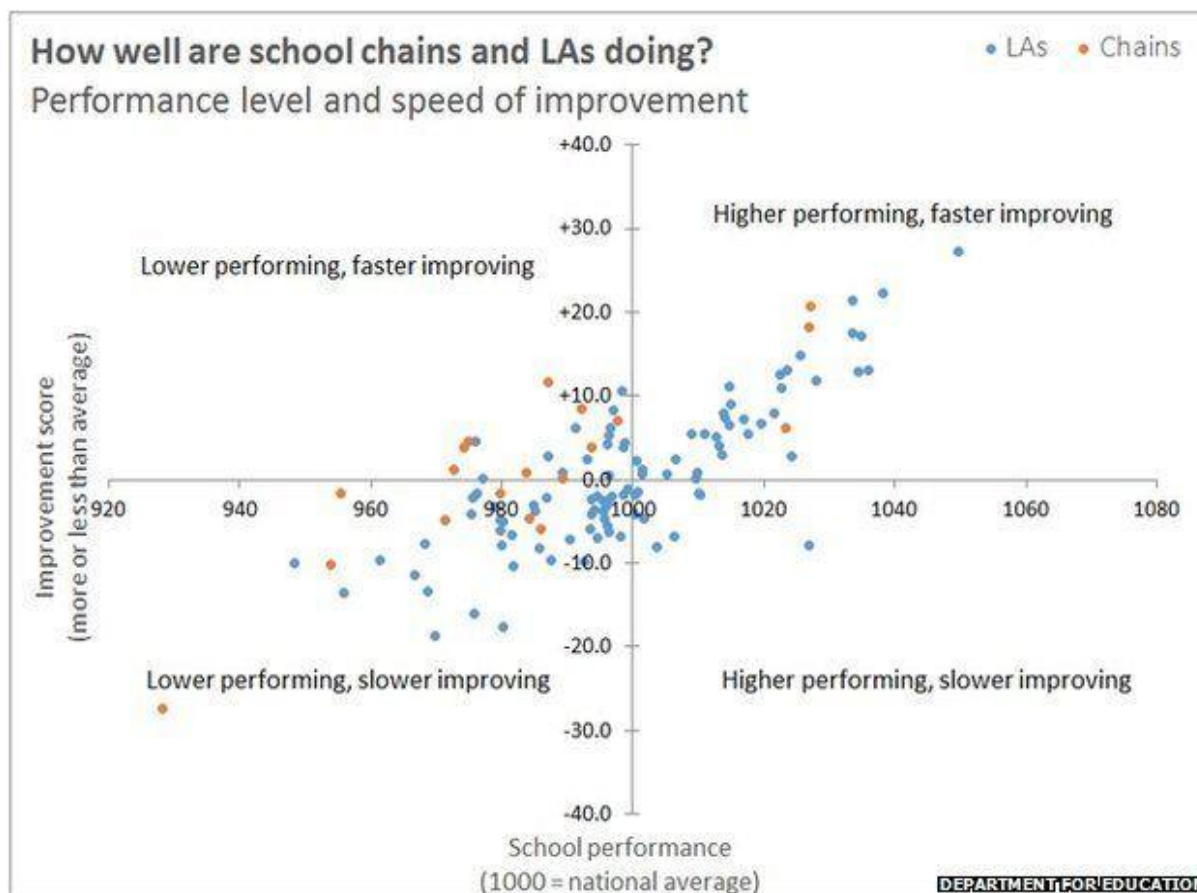


51 per cent of MATs performed significantly below average on Progress 8 at key stage 4. However, the measure does not fully account for the historic performance of schools, including the poor prior performance of schools that became sponsored academies (which make more than three-quarters of the academies in these results).

<sup>1</sup> This document describes the results of analysis of the performance of mainstream academies (including free schools, studio schools and university technical colleges) in the 2015/16 academic year compared with other state-funded mainstream schools.

**Figure II**

**School Performance in Academy Chains<sup>xii</sup>**



In Figure II the academy chains are compared with schools that continue to be run by local authorities, the academy chains being represented by orange dots. The abstraction this representation offers about school performance illustrates once again a denial of alternative discourses about schooling. In each figure the deployment of mathematical statistics annexes for the authors objectivity and an apparent neutrality of assessment which silences other political interpretations of education and progression. The array of dots in the scatter diagram leads the gaze towards mathematics. By contrast, qualitative representations of progress cannot readily direct or control the gaze, and may therefore provoke unsolicited debate. Human subjectivity cannot escape the impact of regimes of rationality: Foucault (1970) argues “man” is erased through the operation of changing historical forces whose effects are constitutive of what makes us human and

normal. His analysis of modern punishment in *Discipline and Punish* has been seminal in the analysis of processes of schooling as a type of governmentality and micro-surveillance.

### **ARK academy**

In Figure III, the ARK academy presents itself in terms of the results gained by attainment in the national AS examination. The webpage contains the type of corporate language used for the conveyance of a decorative metrics. Numbers make the benchmark of truth, and prescribe the limits of what can be said. The “extremely positive” phrase is also quantified by referencing “grade 4” The subjectivities of students, teachers and parents, the intended consumers of this branding, are being encouraged to judge educational worth, and the success of the Academy, through the touchstone of figures; percentages proliferate in the qualitative textual reporting of achievement. The list of subject areas is colonised by adjacent grade percentages in columns headed “Attain”, the imperative form of verb foregrounding hyper-competitive ideals.



### Figure III

#### Ark Academy webpage: “Our first AS Results”<sup>xiii</sup>

## ARK ACADEMY 2015-16 Our first AS Results!

Our inaugural set of AS results had a number of highlights for us...

- Firstly, our school ALPs report, which sums up student attainment against national data of the top performing 25% of student, was extremely positive at grade 4. This means our year 12 results are in the top 40% of grades across the country.
- In terms of attainment, 29% of students attained 3+ A-C and 71% attained 3+ A-E. Students average grade for all entries was C and the overall A-E rate was 94%. There were a number of exceptional subject highlights including the A-B rate in Physics (73%) Further Maths (80%) and History (88%) and the A-C rate in Government and Politics (75%) Drama & Theatre Studies (70%) and Chemistry (67%)

Headline Measure	Ark Academy Summer 2 2015/16
ALPs School T-Score	4
% 3+ A*-B	18%
% 3+ A*-C	29%
% 3+ A*-E	71%
Average AS grade	Grade C

	Y12 Attain A-E	Y12 Attain A-C	Y12 Attain A-B
Biology	83%	52%	26%
Business	85%	31%	0%
Chemistry	100%	67%	44%
Drama and Theatre Studies	100%	70%	30%
Economics	90%	48%	27%
English Literature	100%	38%	13%
Further Maths	100%	80%	80%
French	71%	43%	
Geography	70%	20%	10%
Government and Politics	100%	75%	25%
History	100%	88%	88%
Maths	90%	60%	42%
Media	100%	44%	22%
Music	100%	100%	100%
Philosophy and Ethics	100%	86%	57%
Physics	100%	93%	73%
Product Design	100%	60%	0%
Psychology	97%	43%	17%
Sociology	100%	63%	8%
Spanish	100%	60%	20%
Textiles	100%	100%	

*Congratulations to all of our students and staff on their hard work in the run up to the first set of AS examinations... so many results to be proud of! We look forward to seeing what you can do as you approach the final hurdle before University!*

### **Harris Federation<sup>xiv</sup>**

In the next two sets of qualitative data the Harris Federation of academies presents attainment. Again, this is an iteration of performativity discourse of statistical appraisal benchmarking. The boxes below present the Harris Federation's discursive construction, the audience for which will include parents, students and employers in addition to the DfE.

#### **The Priory School to join Harris Federation**

##### **The Priory School in Orpington will join the Harris Federation of academies in September 2016.**

The school is already an academy, having converted in 2012. By joining the Harris Federation it will benefit from a great deal of focused support as it seeks to transform the education on offer to students and come out of its Ofsted category of 'serious weaknesses'.

The Harris Federation, a not-for-profit charity, runs 20 secondary academies in and around London including Harris Academy Beckenham and Harris Girls' Academy Bromley. Three quarters of Harris secondary academies inspected have been rated 'Outstanding' by Ofsted with the remaining quarter judged 'Good'. This track record is unmatched..."

Continuing their narrative of progress in the next extract from their public website, additional metrics are used to underpin and project a positive reputational brand:

**“Harris success at primary and secondary”**

The Department for Education has published new data about how different schools are performing at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4. This includes an analysis of multi-academy trusts (MATs).

The data is based on the performance of schools in 2016 SATs and GCSEs and all multi-academy trusts (MATs) with more than three schools open for at least three years have been included.

Harris academies performed exceptionally well, building on our strong results in previous years.

The DfE’s key findings in relation to the Harris Federation, are presented by the Federation as follows:

**Key Stage 2 (KS2)**

We were one of 95 MATs included by the DfE.

10 Harris primary academies were included in the data – all those which were in their third academic year or more by 2015/16.

There are three performance measures: our children’s progress in Reading, Writing and Maths.

In Reading, the score across our group was 2.5. This was the sixth highest score of the 95 MATs included.

In Writing, our score was 3.6, the fourth highest score.

And in Maths, our score of 3.3 was also the fourth highest score.

The DfE consider us to be performing ‘significantly above average’ in all three measures. The Harris Federation is one of only 6 out of 95 MATs to have achieved this.

#### **Key Stage 4 (KS4)**

We were one of 47 MATs to be included in the DfE’s analysis.

16 Harris secondary academies were included in the data – as with primary, only schools open for three years or more by 2015/16 were factored in.

The Progress 8 score across the 16 Harris academies was **+0.42**. This was the third highest score of any MAT, with the groups featuring first and second running five academies and three academies each.

It is worth noting that because schools have not been included if they were less than three years old last summer, Harris Academy Battersea has not been factored in to the DfE’s analysis. At 1.14, its Progress 8 was the highest of any Harris academy. Its success has been noted by the Evening Standard and Guardian among others.

The DfE consider our Progress 8 score to be ‘significantly above average’ – we are one of just 11 MATs to achieve this...”

The decorative ‘cover story’ recruits the reader to interpolate with a notion of progress. Piece (2013) argues metrics stabilize a truth regime congruent with individualism. The criteria of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ promulgated by academy schools, to which the material in the figures alludes, are designed to persuade

readers to follow the academy brands. They present educational success as a business presents commercial success.

Deference to authority, obedience and conformity are prized attributes in the academies. Harris Academy's Bermondsey school prospectus, asserts:

“All HAB girls know our rules and abide by them. We expect every girl to be on time, dressed correctly and prepared to work hard, always following staff instructions. Our girls always want to live up to these expectations, but on the rare occasion that one of them fails to do so, she knows there will be clear consequences, followed by support to learn from the experience.” (page 7)

The efficiency demeanour capitalism, using the discourse of human resource management, is apparent in this disciplinary instruction, which imposes conformity through expectation. Divergence from the student pack has “clear consequences”, none of which are spelled out, making self-responsibility an obligation. The imbrication of the logic of capitalism within education is, as the behaviourist psychology of this extract illustrates, extended to constructing their selfhood as a suitable member of an obedient neo-liberal labour force.

## **Discussion**

In this paper we have argued these metrics are “benchmarks” of truth, that is, metrics are representations which function to project a tacit commercial branding. The virtuous circle they invoke is individualism and public achievement and capitalist accumulation. The growth of a suitable labour force requires that students are moulded subjectively so their material vitality can be extracted. Developing this cadre of capitalists requires the adoption of techniques of assessment and testing that selects ‘the fittest’.

The analysis of the academy schools' visual website text, and the metrics which these encode, foreground the theme of a form of schooling which excludes and privileges different expressions of education and worth in terms of how progression is characterised. In terms of the emphasis on speed that arises in the literature about bio-capitalism we witness several tropes of competition and forward push in these data sources (Peters *et al.*, 2010). Danisch (2017: 64) defines "rhetorical agency" as an ability to speak or to express oneself; it is a type of empowerment. Metrics, by contrast, serves different political dispositions, whose origin and purpose lies in the commercial market-place of the neo-liberal state. Through an annexation of the authority of mathematical science, metrics lays claim to discourses of objectivity and authority whose truth effects marginalise alternative voices. Foucault in the *History of Madness*, argues power "masks" or conceals as it goes about producing realities. The rituals of verification of educational progression, examination pass rates and school inspection ratings act to repress difference and favour a single monolithic account of the nature and purpose of schooling, a theme taken up in the empirical section of this paper. Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* challenges the idea of the visibility of inspection. Not unlike Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, metrics makes visible, through its arc of pervasive surveillance of pupils and teachers, hegemonic definitions of educational productivity. Danisch (2017: 75) states:

"The creation of statistics meant that populations could be broken into groups, about which we could produce knowledge. Through the creation and quantification of these populations, individuals learn how to act as subjects within groups."

Through an extensive reliance upon metrics of accountability the academy school provision, we argue, controls what educational worth and success mean.

The subjectivity of the pupil is engaged, in essentially clandestine ways, with valorising the networks of the sponsors of academies and therefore they become unwittingly complicit in the reproduction of a social business elite. As subjects of schooling, pupils at academies, it is being suggested in this section, will acquire expertise in the discourse of a business performativity, judging themselves against its benchmarks of value. Bio-capitalism connects the growth of the life sciences with late capitalism (Peters *et al.*, 2010). It controls change and experiments with the material basis of life. Examples were identified in the web data sources of the concept of experimentation and testing of students. Bio-capitalism needs the factory (Rose, 2009); because of its costly nature venture capitalists are required. In a parallel vein these entrepreneurs are instrumental in the operation of academy schools. The latter are positioned as a type of extractive resource to support bio-capitalism. Schools are a laboratory through which human experimentation can occur in the metrical terms of biotechnology. Danisch (2017: 79) argues as follows:

“Neo-liberalism relies on a notion of agency in which I am an individual, subjective, economic, rational agent. The great success of the neo-liberal state relies on my atomisation and differentiation from others.”

The scale of metrics in everyday life has amplified. Individuals are increasingly located in comparative matrices of actions and outcomes (Beer, 2016). Stiglitz *et al.* (2010) argue that in an increasingly performance-oriented society, metrics matter through their facilitation of judgements whose boundaries shape social worlds. Metrics are critical to contemporary governance. The hierarchical accountability that metrics offer gives advantage in the competitive marketplace of neo-liberalism, but at a cost to wider politics and society. The loss to the wellbeing of wider society reflects the homogenisation of education, which appears to be the likely consequence of the educational processes across the

academy chain ideology. As education has intergenerational effects and is a source for the promotion of alternative perspectives about the political order, it is these options about other ways of living and different political and economic practices that the English academy chains are unlikely to foster. Instead the capitalist *status quo* and its underpinning values are likely to be the sole winners in the neo-liberally framed order that has explored in the emphasis of this paper.

Academy schools are a form of capitalist accumulation. Their emphasis will impede ideological alternatives and other ‘structures of feeling’. The deployment of mathematical figures and comparative statistical reasoning acts to conceal the chronic absence of debate, contestation and critical voice. Metrics as empirical science are ideal partners for the capitalist entrepreneur whose own personal and family wealth reflects the successful application of the accounting logics of finance and measurement to trading. David Harvey (1990: 10) discusses Jonathan Raban’s *Soft City* which he claims depicts “a widespread individualism and entrepreneurialism in which marks of social distinction were broadly conferred by possessions and appearances”. To this analysis attainment metrics can be added; these measurements bestow social distinction on schools, sponsors and pupils through placing them mathematically a position in the social field of neo-liberalism, portable qualification is conferred.

The tables and graphs presented by the academies invite us to interpellate ourselves with hard-edged achievement, where winners are identified, and hierarchies of branding are established against competitor educational provisions, and to become the bearers of the structures these represent (Althusser, 1971). The figures encode the neo-liberal sensibility of the sponsors and their Conservative government supporters, where the former’s own wealth has accumulated through skilful trading and commercial market estimation of profitability. Harvey (1990: 20) examines the thesis that “the logic that hides



behind Enlightenment rationality is a logic of domination and oppression". The figures presented in the data section of this paper can be interpreted as the yield gained through corporate investments in comparatively marginalised urban populations. However, as recognised earlier, the standardisation and vertical accountability practices of academy chains is at a cost of the erosion of more nuanced local ties to community. The portability of the decorative, statistically legitimated attainment renders these pupils globally useful to the broader sweep of capitalist accumulation. It is no surprise that a neo-liberal Conservative government is enthusiastic about this genre of schooling, nor is it odd to find these schools receiving enthusiastic support from immensely wealthy British capitalist philanthropists. Academy schools are modelled on the enterprise society. If the narrow and politically biased emphasis of their extractive logics are to alter, it is necessary to turn to the education of teachers and the raising of parents' awareness.

## Acknowledgements

I am hugely grateful for the comments provided by reviewers, whose contribution aided the development of this paper. I am also grateful to the academy school trusts that responded to my FOI requests.

## Notes

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- <sup>i</sup> D. Harvey. (2007) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- <sup>ii</sup> [www.ref.ac.uk](http://www.ref.ac.uk).
- <sup>iii</sup> <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/tef/>
- <sup>iv</sup> [www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/school/137578](http://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/school/137578), and see Department for Education, 19<sup>th</sup> January 2017, SFR 02/2017. Multi-academy trust performance measures: England 2015-2016.
- <sup>v</sup> See [www.companieshouse.gov.uk](http://www.companieshouse.gov.uk) for the Harris Federation's historic statutory accounts.
- <sup>vi</sup> [Antiacademies.org.uk/2012/03/harris-federation-spotlight-on-sponsors](http://Antiacademies.org.uk/2012/03/harris-federation-spotlight-on-sponsors).
- <sup>vii</sup> [Arkacademy.org/about-us/case-studies](http://Arkacademy.org/about-us/case-studies). Jim Collins, *Good to Great* 2001. William Collins. "Greatness", in this book, is defined as the achievement financial performance multiples better than market average over a sustained period.
- <sup>viii</sup> Personal Communication 16/6/17
- <sup>ix</sup> Connect Academy Trust register at Companies House, London. <https://beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/company/10192252>.

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- <sup>x</sup> FOI response of Future Academies made, 6/7/2017. [www.futureacademies.org](http://www.futureacademies.org).
- <sup>xi</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education>. And, <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/>.
- <sup>xii</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education>. And, <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/>.
- <sup>xiii</sup> <http://arkacademy.org/about-us/governing-body>
- <sup>xiv</sup> [www.harrisfederation.org.uk](http://www.harrisfederation.org.uk)

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